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C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 000530

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: VATICAN POSITIVE ON RUSSIA TRIP

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶11. (C) Holy See FM Lajolo told the Ambassador November 3 that his recent trip to Russia had been a useful step forward for Vatican relations with Russia and the Orthodox Church (ROC). Lajolo said he raised with Russian FM Lavrov the Holy See's perception that Russia was captive to the Orthodox Church in its diplomacy with the Vatican. Lavrov admitted that ROC interests inevitably figured into the diplomatic equation, but insisted that his government made its own decisions on Vatican diplomacy. Lavrov brought up Ukraine, clearly concerned about the role the Latin and Greek-rite Catholic Churches might play in orienting the country further West, and then complained about a perceived "double standard" on the part of the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) regarding Russia. ROC Head of External Relations Metropolitan Kirill also raised the Ukraine issue with Lajolo and addressed familiar themes of alleged Catholic proselytism. According to Lajolo, the Kirill meeting was "cordial," but the Vatican made its points on the religious freedom issue by releasing the texts of interviews Lajolo gave to Russian media outlets, calling for "equal dignity and equal freedom" for Catholics in Russia. Though there may have been few concrete results from the trip, Lajolo emphasized that "all dialogue is positive." End Summary.

Step Forward

¶12. (C) Holy See FM-equivalent Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo told the Ambassador during his November 3 welcome call that his recent trip to Russia had been a useful step forward for Vatican relations with Russia and the Orthodox Church (ROC). Lajolo admitted that the trip had yielded few concrete accomplishments, but said that in the broad context of Vatican interests in the region, any step forward - even symbolic - was important.

Russian Government - Orthodox Church Connections

¶13. (C) Lajolo noted that an invitation from Russian FM Lavrov in June had brought about the visit. Lajolo said that when he met Lavrov, he did not shy away from perhaps the key point in Vatican - Russian relations, raising with him the Holy See's perception that Russia was captive to the Orthodox Church in its diplomacy with the Vatican. Lavrov admitted that ROC interests inevitably figured into the diplomatic equation, but insisted that his government charted its course on Vatican diplomacy independent of an ROC imprimatur. Lajolo told the Ambassador he was not naive about Orthodox influence upon the government, and noted that President Putin's wife had strong ties to the ROC.

Ukraine a Concern

¶14. (C) Lajolo half-joked that he tried to avoid talking about Ukraine with Lavrov, but the Russian FM brought it up anyway, clearly concerned about the role the Latin and Greek-rite Catholic Churches might play in orienting the country further West. It was no news to Lajolo that the Russians saw these churches -- and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - as a potential threat to Russian cultural influence. Moreover, in previous conversations with Post about the Ukrainian election controversy, Holy See officials have praised the role of Ukrainian Greek Catholic Cardinal Lubomyr Husar, whose public statements boosted the Orange Revolution (ref b). These sentiments notwithstanding, Lajolo said he assured Lavrov that the Catholic Church had no intention of trying to influence the Ukraine's balance between East and West.

"Special" Relations with Russia

15. (C) Lajolo discussed with the Ambassador the "relations of a special nature" established between the Holy See and Russia in 1990 with an exchange of "representatives with the rank of ambassador" rather than fully accredited ambassadors. In Russia Lajolo had told the press that the current state of relations did not reflect the weight that each state wielded in the world, and he opened the door for an upgrade in relations. With the Ambassador, Lajolo did not place as much emphasis on this issue,

though he noted that the state of relations was on full display at the many papal events at the Vatican, at which the Russian chief of mission had to sit in protocol order behind all the other ambassadors.

OSCE Complaints

16. (C) Lavrov also brought up the OSCE with Lajolo, charging that the organization (in particular the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR) operated with a "double standard" between Russia and Western Europe. Lavrov complained that ODIHR operated too independently of OSCE leadership. [Note: The Holy See is a full member of the OSCE and has engaged us on some OSCE issues. In this case, Lajolo did not give an opinion on the Russian charges. End note.]

Kirill Hits Familiar Themes

17. (C) Lajolo also met with ROC Head of External Relations Metropolitan Kirill (ROC Patriarch Alexi was out of town, and Kirill is Lajolo's counterpart in any case). He was encouraged by Kirill's pledge to work with the Holy See on the promotion of common values in an increasingly secular Europe, though this did not break new ground in Catholic-ROC relations. Kirill, too, raised the issue of Catholic influence in Ukraine, but Lajolo noted that members of the Latin and Greek rites of the Catholic Church in Ukraine had ongoing intra-Catholic disputes. They might not be as likely as Kirill feared, Lajolo said, to join with the Ukrainian Orthodox to pull the country away from Russia.

18. (C) No Catholic-ROC discussion is complete without ample charges of Catholic proselytism, and Kirill did not disappoint. Lajolo recounted for the Ambassador the traditional Catholic frustrations on the issue. The ROC viewed its lands as its private "hunting ground" - canonical territory in which only the ROC should hold sway, Lajolo explained. He emphasized that the Catholic Church had no program or interest in converting members of the Russian Orthodox Church. Lajolo complained, however, that in ROC eyes, even Russian atheists without the slightest connection to the ROC were off limits, and innocuous Catholic social programs for the poor or Catholic-run orphanages were regarded as part of a grand plot to undermine the Orthodox. "Only now," Lajolo observed, was the ROC starting to engage in social justice issues. Once the Orthodox started to realize that such engagement was a legitimate aspect of a church's mission not necessarily connected to proselytism, he said, he hoped they would be less suspicious of Catholic endeavors.

Vatican Releases Interview Texts

19. (SBU) While the meeting with Kirill was "cordial," the Holy See made its point on the religious freedom issue by releasing the texts of interviews Lajolo gave to Russian media outlets. In the interviews, the Holy See FM urged Russian Orthodox authorities to concede the country's Catholics "equal dignity and equal freedom," while at the same time acknowledging the Orthodox Church's "predominant position." Lajolo emphasized that the small Catholic community in the country was "truly Russian" - something he also emphasized to the Ambassador. Though Russia's Catholics are predominantly of Polish and German extraction, Lajolo pointed out that the community has deep roots in Russia. He admitted that Catholic Church leadership in Russia was often foreign.

Papal Visit

110. (C) As for a papal visit to Russia - long sought by Pope John Paul II - Lajolo commented publicly that Pope Benedict XVI would not visit the country if it did not contribute to greater understanding and agreement between Catholics and Russian Orthodox. Privately, he told us that despite the pope's emphasis on closer unity with the Orthodox, we should not expect a papal visit to Russia soon.

Comment

¶11. (C) Lajolo was very open with the Ambassador in their initial meeting, and the two touched on several issues. In response to comments from the FM, the Ambassador outlined the President's plans to combat avian flu, and he encouraged the Holy See to continue its strong statements against terrorism,

such as the pope made recently in Cologne (ref d).

¶12. (C) But having just returned from the East, Lajolo's main focus was still Russia. He was under no illusions about the pace of improved relations with the ROC, and observed that the road would be difficult, as the Russians continued to be suspicious of the West. Still, Lajolo maintained that trips such as his could help continue dialogue and build relations. He was pleased that a joint Catholic-Orthodox theological commission would be reinvigorated after his trip. This may be nothing more than a "chance for us to sit down and drink some tea - or vodka," Lajolo said, "but all dialogue is positive."

ROONEY

SANDROLINI

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